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AUTHOR Kalfus, Richard
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ABSTRACT

For many years, St. Louis Community College at Meramec has offered two distinct sets of foreign language courses: day and evening credit courses on elementary and intermediate levels and noncredit, adult evening classes on elementary I and II levels. The 10-week adult courses were usually taught by part-time instructors, although full-time faculty could teach an adult language class as an overload. In 1981, a reorganization process was initiated so that all full-time faculty could teach the classes, should day enrollment be insufficient to make up a full teaching load. A four-semester sequence of conversation-oriented German courses was established, offering both a credit and a noncredit option. Maximum enrollment was set at 30 students, with an adjustable space allotment of 20 for credit students and 10 for noncredit students. Successful enrollment in German gave the Foreign Language Department the confidence to expand the program to Spanish and French in fall 1983. Benefits of the program included the following: (1) adults can participate in a 2-year program without the fear that, once started, they will be unable to continue in the second year due to lack of enrollment; (2) students have unusually high motivation levels and special appreciation for the instructor's teaching skills and language ability; and (3) instructors are encouraged to respond to a great diversity in student backgrounds and objectives with flexibility, creativity, and enthusiasm. (EJV)

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An Adult Education Foreign Language Program in the Community College: An Innovative Approach

Richard Kalfus
Chair, Humanities Department
St. Louis Community College

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JC 870 321

An Adult Education Foreign Language Program in the Community College: An Innovative Approach

For many years St. Louis Community College at Meramec has offered two distinct set of foreign language courses: day and evening credit classes on an elementary and intermediate level and noncredit, adult evening classes on elementary 1 and 11 levels. While enrollment in our credit courses during the 70's had experienced many lows, enrollment in noncredit classes was consistently high. Language learning in our suburban, relatively affluent community was an ideal enrichment experience for older adults with the resources for foreign travel. These 10 week, 20 hours a semester classes were usually taught by part-time instructors, although full-time faculty could teach an adult language class as an overload. For five years I had taught an evening, adult education German class as part of my full-time teaching assignment while I was building up the day program. My experience teaching these evening courses gave me the idea for reorganizing the adult courses so that all full-time faculty could teach them, should day enrollment be insufficient to make up a full teaching load.

In 1981, we began to reorganize the German evening classes. German was a natural language with which to begin, since it traditionally had the best evening enrollment (St. Louis has a strong German heritage). A four semester sequence of conversation, oriented courses was established which offered both a credit and noncredit option. The classes met once a week for 16 weeks from 7:30-10:00 p.m. The course titles were: Basic German Conversation 1 and 11 and Intermediate German Conversation 1 and 11. Maximum enrollment was set at 30 students with a 20 space allotment for credit students and 10 spaces for noncredit enrollees. A brochure describing these new German courses was designed and mailed out to prospective students in the community. The division of credit and noncredit allocation could be adjusted as needed, since computer registration made it easy to alter capacity at anytime. The first three course offerings showed a fairly even distribution between credit and noncredit students. What we did not anticipate was the initial response of 39 students in Basic German Conversation 1 in fall, 1981. An abundance of riches which immediately required adjustments. It is impossible to teach 39 students a foreign language with a conversational approach. I painfully discovered this when faced with 39 eager adult learners in the fall of 1981. What an ironic situation for a teacher of 15 years experience who, up until 1981, never had more than 22 students in one daytime class.

Thanks to a very supportive administration, we were able to avoid a recurrence of the problem in the future: we placed a second beginning section of German on hold and when enrollment reached 31 students, this reserved section was opened.

Registration was evenly distributed between the two classes. For the past few years, we have been able to enroll between 18 and 25 students in two sections of beginning German, the only exceptions being spring semester, 1985 and 1987. (See Figure 1)

Successful enrollment in German gave the Foreign Language Department the confidence to expand the program to Spanish and French in fall, 1983. A new brochure was printed featuring course descriptions for all classes, information about the credit/noncredit option, reasons for taking a foreign language at Meramec and registration procedures. A computerized mailing list was established which included the name of former students, travel agencies, and personnel directors from international businesses in the St. Louis area (e.g. Monsanto, Mallincrodt, Ralston Purina). Beginning Spanish and French courses have generally been as successful as German. (See Figures 2 and 3) There were, for example, 50 students enrolled in two sections of Basic French Conversation 1 during the fall semester 1986, more students than in any previous evening course.

I am very excited about the development of our program. The success of any program, however, should never be judged on the basis of enrollment statistics; consistently good registration is also a reflection of quality instruction. Because of the high number of satisfied students who have taken our evening courses, the foreign language staff at Meramec has gained, in the past three years, some well deserved visibility and prestige both on campus and in the community.

One of the major objectives in the credit/noncredit evening program was to meet a need in the St. Louis area for evening language courses which adults could take one evening a week over a two year period without having to fear that once they started, they would be unable to continue in the second year due to a lack of enrollment. Area high schools and four year colleges and universities have offered evening, beginning language courses for adults, but they have been unable to maintain enrollment in the second year. Some high schools, for example, have tried to teach intermediate students by placing them in classes which combine several ability levels. The language teacher is well aware how pedagogically unsound such a learning situation can be. The colleges and universities in our service area have not fared any better. The beginning language class which they usually offer is a traditional 5 credit course; a follow-up, second year course often does not "make." Only recently has one of our local universities, through the division of continuing education, departed from its traditional offerings to begin teaching noncredit, adult education classes. Unlike our program, these courses do not offer the students the credit/noncredit option.

Because only about 40% of our students will continue in the second year, high enrollment in the beginning two courses is

naturally an important prerequisite for sustaining the intermediate levels. If you look at Figures 1, 2, and 3, you will notice that in German we have been able to complete the four semester sequence three times: fall, '82 - spring '84 (number of students--33, 28, 23, 13) fall '84 - spring '86 (number of students--34, 26, 18, 24), fall '85 - spring '87 (number of students--38, 25, 15, 11); in Spanish the sequence has been taught twice: fall '84 - spring '86 (number of students--31, 22, 21, 16), fall '85 - spring '87 (number of students 42, 14, 21, 17).[1] In French we have only taught the intermediate level once: fall '85 - spring '87 (number of students--49, 23, 17, 17), but the prospects for the next year are good since fall '86 Basic French Conversation I enrolled 50 students and spring '87 Basic French Conversation II had 26 students.

One of the interesting features of our program is the diverse background of the students and the different reasons which motivate them to enroll in a foreign language class. A quick overview reveals: retired, older adults who have the time and resources to travel; adults between the ages of 35-50 who either are planning a trip abroad or who once were required to take a foreign language in high school or college but now actually want to learn to speak a foreign language; people in the business community with job related contacts overseas; young professionals--often recent college graduates who want a stimulating and challenging educational experience; evening, part time community college students, working during the day who can partially fulfill their humanities requirement with a foreign language course; full time transfer students to the University of Missouri at St. Louis who need 13 credit hours in foreign language for a B.A. degree (through a recent articulation agreement with UMSL, our three credit evening conversation courses are transferable.

The unusually high motivation of the students and their appreciation for the instructor's teaching skills and language ability make the instruction of these courses an absolute delight. Personally, I prefer teaching in the evening program to teaching traditional language courses during the day. I find myself on an emotional high when I finish an evening class, because the positive feedback from most students is so rewarding. Let me relate just one of many testimonials from students in our evening program. A 40 year old, unemployed police officer returned to college. Basic German Conversation I was his his first college course and the joy and success he experienced in the class gave him the confidence to continue course work at Meramec. "Without your support," he said, "and the satisfaction I gained from learning a foreign language, I would never have believed I was capable of handling other college courses."

Although the positive aspects of a credit/noncredit evening language program far outweigh any negative factors, there are

certain problems which have to be addressed. It takes a flexible, innovative, and above all enthusiastic instructor to balance effectively the various needs and objectives of so diverse a student body in one class. Homework should be completed by everyone, but it can only be required of credit students. Regular testing and the assigning of grades are necessary for credit students but not a requirement for noncredit adults. Good attendance should be the goal of everyone in the class, but only credit students can be penalized for excessive absence. In addition, past exposure to the foreign language varies greatly among students due to previous instruction, family background, travel, or residence abroad and, of course, language aptitude. Meeting only once a week also puts a limit on the amount of material which can be covered and the transition from one class to another is made more difficult by a one week time lapse between classes. The attrition rate is high among both credit and noncredit students. Over the years, several reasons have become evident: after a full days work, it is difficult for some students to complete assignments regularly and to come to class each week prepared for a two and a half hour period of concentration. Many adults have an unrealistic expectation of language learning, not fully aware that dedication and commitment in time and energy are necessary, if successful language acquisition is to take place.

I have discovered that many of these obstacles can be overcome when flexibility is combined with dedication and enthusiasm. Take home assignments, for example, collected and graded weekly, can often replace in class testing (the noncredit student will feel less intimidated). Many different teaching techniques promote the use of the target language, whether a class meets once a week or everyday: fast paced, transformation/substitution drills,rejoinders, pair activities focusing on vocabulary and syntax responses, innovative use of the overhead (e.g. cutting up a dialogue and then reconstructing it with the class), developing mini profiles of dialogue characters, and summarizing a reading passage with cue cards. The list can be as varied as the instructor's willingness to prepare carefully for every class. Above all else, the teacher must use praise and encouragement generouslly. Older students are more vulnerable to criticism than the typical 18 year old. Yet when approached with humor and tact they become wonderful risk takers willing to make mistakes in order to learn. And when they "stick with us at Meramec," it is an unparalleled joy to observe their progress during four semesters.

NOTES

[1] It was unusual that only 14 students registered for Basic Spanish Conversation II after 42 students attended two beginning fall classes. An unenthusiastic, part-time instructor who overemphasized grammar and translation, was a contributing factor.

Figure 1

ENROLLMENT GERMAN

N/O = not offered
C = cancelled

	Basic German Conversation I	Basic German Conversation II	Intermed. German Conversation I	Intermed. German Conversation II
Fall '81 credit	20	N/O	N/O	N/O
noncredit	19			
Total	39			
Spring '82 credit	N/O	15	N/O	N/O
noncredit		11		
Total		26		
Fall '82 credit	19	N/O	N/O	N/O
noncredit	14			
Total	33			
Spring '83 credit	N/O	17	N/O	N/O
noncredit		11		
Total		28		
Fall '83 credit	38	C	10	N/O
noncredit	8		13	
Total	46		23	
Spring '84 credit	25	12	C	7
noncredit	15	14		6
Total	40	26		13
Fall '84 credit	25	10	C	N/O
noncredit	9	13		
Total	34	23		
Spring '85 credit	23	14	C	N/O
noncredit	7	12		
Total	30	26		
Fall '85 credit	26	C	8	N/O
noncredit	12		10	
Total	38		18	
Spring '86 credit	16	16	N/O	12
noncredit	19	9		12
Total	35	25		24
Fall '86 credit	30	6	5	N/O
noncredit	14	10	10	
Total	44	16	15	
Spring '87 credit	20	13	5	2
noncredit	10	5	10	9
Total	30	18	15	11

Figure 2

ENROLLMENT SPANISH

N/O = not offered
C = cancelled

	Basic Spanish Conversation I	Basic Spanish Conversation II	Intermed Spanish Conversation I	Intermed Spanish Conversation II
Fall '83 credit	28	--	N/O	N/O
noncredit	16	8		
Total	44	8		
Spring '84 credit	21	6	N/O	N/O
noncredit	9	6		
Total	30	12		
Fall '84 credit	27	13	C	N/O
noncredit	4	7		
Total	31	20		
Spring '85 credit	19	18	C	N/O
noncredit	7	4		
Total	26	22		
Fall '85 credit	36	C	18	N/O
noncredit	6		3	
Total	42		21	
Spring '86 credit	22	11	N/O	10
noncredit	5	3		6
Total	27	14		16
Fall '86 credit	36	C	10	N/O
noncredit	9		11	
Total	45		21	
Spring '87 credit	22	10	C	12
noncredit	10	4		5
Total	32	14		17

Figure 3

ENROLLMENT FRENCH

N/O = not offered
C = cancelled

	Basic French Conversation I	Basic French Conversation II	Intermed. French Conversation I	Intermed. French Conversation II
Fall '83 credit	24	N/O	N/O	N/O
noncredit	11			
Total	35			
Spring '84 credit	21	6	N/O	N/O
noncredit	10	4		
Total	31	10		
Fall '84 credit	22	C	C	N/O
noncredit	10			
Total	32			
Spring '85 credit	21	13	N/O	N/O
noncredit	12	6		
Total	33	19		
Fall '85 credit	40	C	C	N/O
noncredit	9			
Total	49			
Spring '86 credit	24	17	N/O	N/O
noncredit	7	6		
Total	31	23		
Fall '86 credit	40	C	12	N/O
noncredit	10		5	
Total	50		17	
Spring '87 credit	15	20	N/O	10
noncredit	5	6		7
Total	20	26		17

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